Proposal Reviews

#230: Recovery Implementation for Riparian Brush Rabbit and Riparian Woodrat on the Lower Stanislaus River

US Fish and Wildlife Service

Final Selection Panel Review	
Research and Restoration Technical Panel Review	
Land Acquisition	
San Joaquin Regional Review	
External Scientific Review	#1 #2 #3
Prior Performance/Next Phase Funding	
Environmental Compliance	
Budget	

Final Selection Panel Review:

CALFED Bay-Delta 2002 ERP PSP
Final Selection Panel Review

Proposal Number: 230

Applicant Organization: US Fish and Wildlife Service

Proposal Title: Recovery Implementation for Riparian Brush Rabbit and Riparian Woodrat on the Lower Stanislaus River

Please provide an overall evaluation rating.

Fund	
As Is	**-**
In Part	**-**
With Conditions	**-**
Consider as Directed Action	**X**
Not Recommended	**-**

Amount: **$13,903,917**

Conditions, if any, of approval (if there are no conditions, please put "None"):

None

Provide a brief explanation of your rating:

The Fish and Wildlife Service submitted extensive comments on this proposal, which the technical panel did not recommend funding. A Department of Parks and Recreation letter also supported the project. The Selection Panel recognizes the need for the immediate conservation action that these agencies urge to save the greatly imperiled riparian brush rabbit and riparian woodrat. However, the panel shares the technical panel's concerns that the merits of this expensive land purchase are difficult to assess and that the Service's captive breeding program has not been integrated into effort that applies adaptive management to the reintroduction of captive-bred animals to the wild. The proposal and the USFWS's comment letter promise habitat restoration and management that will be critical to project success (especially with at least half of land to be acquired currently in cultivation), but the program's details are lacking in the proposal.

The Panel believes that an experimental framework within which data from monitoring can be used to inform ongoing conservation planning and actions is required before recommending this important effort. Also missing is a conceptual model that describes, not just the project's approach, but how that approach can be effective given the current knowledge of the species and their habitats.

The Selection Panel therefore recommends that the CALFED ERP pursue this project as an expedited directed action. The panel further recommends that the applicants work with the ERP to address the proposal's shortcomings, in particular, to develop an integrated conservation strategy that introduces land acquisition opportunities and captive breeding efforts into a well-informed, fully intergrated species and habitat management action plan.

Given the urgency to address these species' conservation needs, the CALFED ERP may want to consider funding in part of immediate actions that are critical to the survival of the riparian brush rat and riparian woodrat as the revised proposal is being developed.

Research and Restoration Technical Panel Review:

CALFED Bay-Delta 2002 ERP PSP
Research and Restoration Technical Panel Review Form

Proposal Number: 230

Applicant Organization: US Fish and Wildlife Service

Proposal Title: Recovery Implementation for Riparian Brush Rabbit and Riparian Woodrat on the Lower Stanislaus River

Review:

Please provide an overall evaluation summary rating:

Superior: outstanding in all respects;
Above Average: Quality proposal, medium or high regional value, and no significant administrative concerns;
Adequate: No serious deficiencies, no significant regional impediments, and no significant administrative concerns;
Not Recommended: Serious deficiencies, significant regional impediments or significant administrative concerns.

Overall Evaluation Summary Rating	Provide a brief explanation of your summary rating
-Superior	**The few reviews of this proposal differed greatly in their ranks, though they raised similar issues. One reviewer ranked it as excellent and two reviewers ranked it as good. The reviewer that ranked it as excellent still questioned the high cost and lack of more explicit hypotheses and actions. The regional review identified the issue as important but noted that it was difficult to follow. The lack of hypotheses for such a direct measure of endangered species responses is surprising and weakens confidence in fully realizing the potential for this investment in the regions restoration. The impacts of captive-bred animals on wild populations is not acknowledged or addressed. It should be a consideration of alternative actions, but it is not even raised as an issue. The budget is far higher than budgets for similar proposed acquisition of fee-title interest in private property. The panel questions an investment of more than $11 million prior to development of a restoration plan. As a result, we cannot recommend funding of this proposal.**
-Above average	
-Adequate	
XNot recommended	

1. **Goals and Justification.** Does the proposal present a clear statement of goals, objectives and hypotheses? Does the proposal present a clear justification and conceptual model for the project?

   The project proposes to provide and protect habitat for riparian brush rabbits and riparian woodrats. The objectives are limited to these operational goals. The hypotheses are extremely weak and are essentially statements that the populations will respond to the treatments. Development of ecologically compelling, testable hypotheses should be straightforward in a study of declining small mammal populations. The actions discussed in

the proposal provide an opportunity for manipulative experimental designs coupled with real world restoration practices and a valuable opportunity to test fundamental ecological concepts. The proposal does not present a clear explanation of a strategy for connecting fragmented populations in a human-dominated landscape. It is surprising that there is no discussion of linking populations through riparian corridors (though they acknowledge that riparian systems are corridors and must be addressed in conservation strategies). The project is justified in terms of recovery of listed species.

2. **Likelihood of Success (Approach, Feasibility, Capabilities and Performance Measures).** Is the project likely to succeed based on the approach, feasibility and project team capabilities? Are the proposed performance measures adequate for measuring the project's success?

   There is a reasonable likelihood that the proposed restoration efforts would be successful. The proposal does not justify the use of a captive breeding program instead of allowing the wild populations to recover in response to habitat protection and restoration. It is surprising that they do not discuss the risks to the genetic structure of wild populations as a result of the genetic alteration that is inherent in artificial breeding programs. Even if this is addressed in the Williams et al. 2001 document, they need to discuss these issues in this proposal. They indicate that the critical nature of the declining population requires immediate actions, but several precautionary steps could be taken to prevent impacts on the wild population genetic structure. Captive-bred animals could be introduced into areas where local populations have been extirpated and habitat restoration can be used in areas where wild populations still exist. It could help to identify any healthy populations or strongholds and develop actions to add contiguous areas of restored habitat. More intensive measures and reintroductions from breeding programs can be used in areas where populations have been extirpated. Land acquisitions and fee systems are always complicated negotiations and outcomes are inherently uncertain. The measures of performance are adequate for measuring the success of the project.

3. **Outcomes and Products.** Will the project advance the state of scientific knowledge in general and/or make an important contribution to the state of knowledge of the Bay-Delta Watershed? For restoration proposals, is the project likely to contribute to ecosystem restoration or species recoveries in a significant way? Will the project produce products useful to decision-makers and scientists?

   The project will not greatly increase the understanding of the Bay Delta Watershed, but additional knowledge about riparian brush rabbits and riparian woodrats may be obtained. The hypotheses are not testable scientific hypotheses and are largely performance measures. The project is likely to contribute to the restoration of habitat for these two species and thereby contributing to the recovery of sensitive species. The outcome of this proposal is significant to decision makers. If rigorous experimental studies are developed, ecologists and environmental scientists will benefit from the proposed restoration project.

4. **Cost/Benefit Comments.** Is the budget reasonable and adequate for the work proposed?

   The budget is asks for $13 million for one year. This is a huge budget. Even considering the investment in fee title acquisition, the request for $11 million for fee-title interest in 1050 acres seems very high ($11,000/acre). This is far higher than fee-title acquisition in other proposals.

5. **Regional Review.** How did the regional panel(s) rank the proposal (High, Medium, Low)? Did the regional panel(s) identify significant benefits (regional priorities, linkages with other activities, local involvement) or impediments (local constraints, conflicts with other activities, lack of local involvement) to this proposal? What were they?

Regional review panel ranked the proposal as High, but they indicated that the proposal was difficult to follow. They also encourage the applicants to coordinate with flood planning entities in the area.

6. **Administrative Review.** Were there significant concerns about the proposal with regard to the prior performance, environmental compliance and budget administrative reviews? What were they?

   The USFWS noted that the 1-yr timeframe is not adequate for completing the CEQA/NEPA documentation and permit acquisition, but they did not think it would interfere with the success of the project.

Miscellaneous comments:

Land Acquisition:

Proposal Number: 230

Applicant Organization: US Fish and Wildlife Service

Proposal Title: Recovery Implementation for Riparian Brush Rabbit and Riparian Woodrat on the Lower Stanislaus River

1. Is the site's ecological importance documented in the proposal?

   XYes **-**No

   If yes, please import relevant text and citations here:

   The riparian brush rabbit (brush rabbit), Sylvilagus bachmani riparius, and the riparian woodrat (woodrat), Neotoma fuscipes riparia, (also known as the San Joaquin Valley woodrat) are two of the most critically endangered species in the Central Valley of California. Both species were federally listed as endangered on February 23, 2000 (USFWS 2000a). Decline of these two species has been the result of riparian habitat loss associated with agricultural and urban development in the San Joaquin Valley and construction and maintenance of flood control levees. Only about 6 percent of the riparian forest community remains in the San Joaquin Valley (CALFED 1999). Although the brush rabbits immediate recovery needs are the driving force behind this proposal, the woodrats will gain from the actions proposed. Until recently only one population of the brush rabbit was known to exist, at the 258-acre Caswell Memorial State Park on the Stanislaus River in San Joaquin County. The continued survival of brush rabbits and woodrats is tenuous because riparian habitat within the park is subject wildfire and to periodic and extensive flooding that exposes these two species to increased predation, and the rabbit to drowning.

   Because of the low number and small size of known populations of the brush rabbit, the Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) and Bureau of Reclamation have launched an aggressive recovery program. Funds are being provided for a 5-year captive propagation program. The captive propagation is scheduled to begin November 2001. In tandem with captive breeding, protection and restoration of riparian habitat is critical as we must provide a minimum of three secure sites for the upcoming release of captive-bred rabbits. Both captive breeding, and habitat protection and restoration are priority one tasks identified in the Recovery Plan for Upland Species of the San Joaquin Valley (USFWS 1998a). Priority one recovery tasks are those tasks needed to prevent extinction. Large areas of riparian habitat or restorable lands exist on the Stanislaus River from Caswell Memorial State Park downstream to its confluence with the San Joaquin River; on the San Joaquin River up and downstream from its confluence with the Stanislaus River; and in the southern Delta area (Old and Middle River areas).

   This proposal focuses on the opportunities along the lower Stanislaus River. We are proposing a Lower Stanislaus River Riparian Preserve on the south bank of Stanislaus River in Stanislaus County, from the confluence with the San Joaquin River up to river mile 9.5, as opportunities become available. Additionally, we are addressing immediate and critical tasks needed just across the river at Caswell Memorial State Park, San Joaquin County.

The Stanislaus River, a major tributary of the San Joaquin River, is subjected to stress from levees and other flood control efforts. The width of the riparian corridor adjacent to the river is greatly reduced from historical levels, which creates less habitat for the brush rabbit and the woodrat. In addition, the uplands outside the levees are in agricultural production, providing no uplands with cover for the brush rabbit and the woodrat to use as refugia during high flows on the river. There is little connection between the floodplain and the river channel and flood way because of the levees. A flood in Caswell Memorial State Park in 1997 may have reduced the known population at that time to near extinction (CALFED 1999). Last years census revealed only two brush rabbits, whereas the 1993 population estimate was 241 rabbits (Williams, pers. comm.). The reduced floodplain corridor concentrates floods and creates catastrophic events for the brush rabbit and woodrat, as was evident in 1995 and 1997. To provide habitat for captive-bred individuals to be placed, the existing riparian corridor, in some cases, needs restoration, expansion, and high ground refugia with cover.

The need for release sites for captive-bred rabbits is presented in the attached Controlled Propagation and Reintroduction Plan for the Riparian Brush Rabbit produced by Williams, et al., (2001) (Attached). In summary; a minimum of three self-sustaining populations, in addition to extant population at Caswell Memorial State Park, are the long-term conservation requirements for the brush rabbit put forth in the Recovery Plan (USFWS 1998a). Ideally, release sites should be on different waterways to minimize the probability that the same stochastic event, such as flooding, would eliminate multiple populations.

Lower Stanislaus River Riparian Preserve: For brush rabbit recovery implementation we need 500-1,000 acres of contiguous riparian with flood refugia and a wildlife-friendly agricultural buffer (the amount of acreage needed for the buffer depends on the propertys configuration, existing condition, proximity of the levee to the river channel, and regulatory constraints). Phases 1and 2 include land protection through fee title/conservation easement. Our planning has included certain preserve-selection criteria; the lower Stanislaus River is being targeted as it meets these criterion (Table 2). We are targeting riparian habitat and adjacent agricultural lands on the south bank of the lower Stanislaus River (river mile 0-9.5) which meet reintroduction selection criteria and are determined to be useful in improving riverine ecosystem functions (Phases 3 & 4). The target area for the Preserve includes approximately 2,300 acres (flowage easement; agriculture) within, adjacent, or just upstream to the boundaries of the San Joaquin River NWR and across the river from Caswell Memorial State Park (Figure 2).

To accommodate levee breeching or setback needed for full-scale restoration (i.e. floodplain restoration and upgrade of floodflow capacity) we anticipate an impact to a maximum of 436 acres of agricultural land (50% prime/50% unique). To accommodate immediate riparian restoration/flood refugia the impact will be more in the neighborhood of 10 - 50 acres (approx. 10 acres, plus refugia mound(s) of ¼ acre, vegetated, above 200 year flood level needed on the land side of the levee). Compatible floodplain agricultural uses, such as cattle grazing or select crops, could continue in areas outside that needed for the riparian habitat.

This Preserve will be a combination of flowage easements and agricultural land utilizing the following prioritization: (1) currently under federal easements (950 acres - 180 flowage easement; 770 agriculture);(2) currently within approved refuge boundary but not yet protected (160 flowage easement - to be funded with phase 1 funds);(3) outside of approved refuge boundary, adjacent to the refuge, and not yet protected (1,185 acres - 238 in flowage easement; 947 agriculture - 136 acres to be funded with phase 1 funds) (4) outside of approved refuge boundary, not adjacent to the refuge, and not yet protected (any of the flowage easement acres available but disjunct. This would mostly benefit extant woodrat populations as connection to protected habitat for brush rabbits would be uncertain). Approximately 30% of the lands to be protected in

this phase are under ACOE flowage easements. These easements generally equate to the area on the river-side of the levee. This area is also what is considered riparian for purposes of appraisal values, however, the actual riparian vegetation is in patches that range from 10 - 70 acres with thin connecting strips. Implementation of Phase 4 will restore the additional required acreage for the brush rabbit population expansion (500-1,000 acres of contiguous riparian habitat). If full-scale restoration is deemed feasible, then additional agricultural land will be taken out of production to accommodate the riparian and floodplain restoration. All acreage numbers and costs are estimates....

Caswell Memorial State Park: Due to recent census results at Caswell Memorial State Park (2 brush rabbits trapped in 2001) tasks have been added to the grant request to further the protection, expansion, and habitat enhancement at the Park. These tasks focus on protecting additional acreage (approximately 90 acres currently in agricultural production - funding requested is $1,080,000) which will provide space for flood refugia (either utilizing the levee or building a mound(s) (Figures 2 and 3). If fee title is acquired, the existing orchard would be restored to riparian habitat at a later phase of the proposal.

2. Is the owner's willingness to sell the site documented in the proposal?

   -Yes **X**No

   If no, please explain:

   No explicit assurance that land will be purchased only from willing sellers is offered. The proposal states only:

   The feasibility of the full-scale restoration is dependant on many factors, the first, to be addressed in this Phase, is the willingness of enough landowners to participate. Our main interest is in lands that are prone to flooding, and although we will change the use of a portion of the land, much will be left in agricultural easement and therefore lifestyles and the sense of a rural community are likely to change very little. We have 2-4 landowners who have expressed interest, however, it is difficult to anticipate the configuration of the final agreement or the length of time it will take to reach those agreements.

3. Is evidence of local government support for the purchase included in the proposal?

   -Yes **X**No

   If yes, please explain:

   "The service expects that some local landowners, levee districts, or elected officials will have issues or concerns."

4. Is the use proposed for the site after its purchase clearly consistent with the site's general plan designation and zoning?

   -Yes **X**No

   If no, please explain:

The Stanislaus County site is zoned A-2-40. The general plan designates it for agriculture and open space, as well protecion and use of natural resources and for protection from natural hazards. The compatibilty of an expanded nature area with county plans and zoning isn't clear.

The San Joaquin County planning department has zoned the land adjacent to Caswell Memorial State Park as (OS/RC) Open Space/Resource Conservation. No information on its general plan is included in the proposal.

5. Is the land mapped as prime farmland, farmland of statewide significance, unique farmland, or farmland of local importance?

   XYes -No

   If yes, please explain the classification:

   No information on soil types is provided, although some orchards apparently are located on these lands.

   Is the site under a Williamson Act contract?

   XYes -No

   Will use of the site change from agriculture after its purchase?

   XYes -No -Not Currently in Agriculture

6. Is this a time-sensitive acquisition opportunity, according to the proposal?

   XYes -No

   If yes, please import relevant text here:

   The declining situation of the brush rabbit does not allow for a pilot project. Rather we need implementation of certain tasks within this phase of the proposal in order to meet critical brush rabbit recovery goals.... Without additional release sites for the captivebred rabbits this species will experience a detrimental genetic bottleneck and could go extinct. The San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) has completed the preparation of the first release site (Christman Island, San Joaquin River) by building a refugial mound with vegetative cover. We anticipate release of the brush rabbits at the Christman Island site in 2002. The Refuge is also restoring 1,130 acres of additional habitat for future brush rabbit expansion, through recruitment from the original release cohort (20 rabbits) and/or additional releases, to the number of rabbits (1,200) needed to be self-sustaining. A second release site needs to be ready in 2003.

Other Comments:

This is among the more confusing of the proposals that seek CALFED funds for land acquisition. Many aspects of it remain ill-defined. If funds are recommended, special care should be taken to clarify the lands to be purchased, assess landowners' willingness to sell, confirm the sites' value for these species (recovery plan is still being drafted/peer review not yet completed), assess the

project's feasibility (local government attitudes, levee district + Reclamation Board approval of levee relocations + floodplain encroachments), and capacity for long term management of lands outside the current park + refuge boundaries.

San Joaquin Regional Review:

Proposal Number: 230

Applicant Organization: US Fish and Wildlife Service

Proposal Title: Recovery Implementation for Riparian Brush Rabbit and Riparian Woodrat on the Lower Stanislaus River

Overall Ranking: **-**Low **-**Medium **X**High

Provide a brief summary explanation of the committee's ranking:

This proposal addresses a high priority need for a critically endangered species. Proposed action deemed feasible and appropriate.

1. Is the project feasible based on local constraints?

   XYes **-**No

   How?

   Riparian easement cost seems low for area comparable values.

   Local concerns regarding loss of agricultural lands are being discussed/addressed. Otherwise, applicant appears to have good relationship with entities directly affected by this project.

2. Does the project pursue the restoration priorities applicable to the region as outlined in the PSP?

   XYes **-**No

   How?

   Project pursues PSP restoration priorities for endangered species in the region.

3. Is the project adequately linked with other restoration activities in the region, such as ongoing implementation projects and regional planning efforts?

   XYes **-**No

   How?

   This section is very complete on Pages 16-17 of proposal. Identifies linkages with SJRNWR, recovery plan and captive breeding plan for Riparian Brush Rabbits.

4. Does the project adequately involve local people and institutions?

   XYes **-**No

How?

Refuge outreach and coordination process is effective. ESRP is good local expertise. Realty office/CNLM have established communications with local property owners.

Other Comments:

This proposal is very difficult to follow. Text wanders, spends much time discussing hypothetical alternatives multiple times. Would be more straight forward to stick with facts and reduce discussion of contingency plans.

Engage comp study/flood planning entities in site restoration plan.

External Scientific: #1

Research and Restoration External Scientific Review Form

Proposal Number: **230**

Applicant Organization: **US Fish and Wildlife Service**

Proposal Title: **Recovery Implementation for Riparian Brush Rabbit and Riparian Woodrat on the Lower Stanislaus River**

Conflict of Interest Statements:
I have no financial interest in this proposal.
XCorrect
-Incorrect

In the blank below please explain any connection to proposal, to applicant, co-applicant or subcontractor or to submitting institution (write "none" if no connection):

none

Review:

Please provide an overall evaluation summary rating:

<u>Excellent:</u> outstanding in all respects;
<u>Good:</u> quality but some deficiencies;
<u>Poor:</u> serious deficiencies.

Overall Evaluation Summary Rating	**Provide a brief explanation of your summary rating**
-Excellent	**This proposal asks for a large amount of money to restore more than 1000 acres. The lack of strong hypotheses for a straightforward study of two endangered species is surprising. This situation creates an excellent opportunity to accomplish a positive outcome for the species and add to our ecological knowledge at the same time. The latter goal was poorly addressed. I was surprised to find little mention of the impacts of captive-bred animals on wild populations. This may have been resolved in earlier reports, but it warrants discussion in a proposal of this size. Release of captive-bred animals could be designed to minimize the impacts on the gene pool, even if the full impacts are poorly understood. The budget is enormous. The costs of easements or fee title interest seem to be inflated in California. Is this just because of CALFED?**
XGood	
-Poor	

1. **<u>Goals.</u>** Are the goals, objectives and hypotheses clearly stated and internally consistent? Is the concept timely and important?

   The proposal clearly states the goal of providing and protecting habitat for riparian brush rabbits and riparian woodrats. The objectives are limited to these operational goals. The hypotheses are extremely weak and are essentially statements that the populations will

respond to the treatments. Development of ecologically compelling, testable hypotheses should be straightforward in a study of declining small mammal populations. The actions discussed in the proposal provide an opportunity for manipulative experimental designs coupled with real world restoration practices and a valuable opportunity to test fundamental ecological concepts.

2. **Justification.** Is the study justified relative to existing knowledge? Is a conceptual model clearly stated in the proposal and does it explain the underlying basis for the proposed work? Is the selection of research, pilot or demonstration project, or a full-scale implementation project justified?

   The project is justified in terms of recovery of listed species.

3. **Approach.** Is the approach well designed and appropriate for meeting the objectives of the project? Are results likely to add to the base of knowledge? Is the project likely to generate novel information, methodology or approaches? Will the information ultimately be useful to decision-makers?

   The proposal does not justify the use of a captive breeding program instead of allowing the wild populations to recover in response to habitat protection and restoration. It is surprising that they do not discuss the risks to the genetic structure of wild populations as a result of the genetic alteration that is inherent in artificial breeding programs. Even if this is addressed in the Williams et al. 2001 document, they need to discuss these issues in this proposal. They indicate that the critical nature of the declining population requires immediate actions, but several precautionary steps could be taken to prevent impacts on the wild population genetic structure. Captive-bred animals could be introduced into areas where local populations have been extirpated and habitat restoration can be used in areas where wild populations still exist. It could help to identify any healthy populations or strongholds and develop actions to add contiguous areas of restored habitat. More intensive measures and reintroductions from breeding programs can be used in areas where populations have been extirpated. Land acquisitions and fee systems are always complicated negotiations and outcomes are inherently uncertain.

4. **Feasibility.** Is the approach fully documented and technically feasible? What is the likelihood of success? Is the scale of the project consistent with the objectives?

   There is a reasonable likelihood that the proposed restoration efforts would be successful.

5. **Project-Specific Performance Measures.** Does the project include appropriate performance measures to measure success relative to the project's goals and objectives? Is there enough detail as to how the performance measures will be quantified? For restoration projects, are monitoring plans explicit and detailed enough to determine if performance measures will be adequately assessed?

   The measures of performance are adequate for measuring the success of the project.

6. **Products.** Are products of value likely from the project? Specifically for restoration projects, are products of value also likely from the monitoring component? Are interpretative outcomes likely from the project?

   The project will not greatly increase the understanding of the Bay Delta Watershed, but additional knowledge about riparian brush rabbits and riparian woodrats may be obtained. The hypotheses are not testable scientific hypotheses and are largely performance measures. The project is likely to contribute to the restoration of habitat for these two species and thereby contributing to the recovery of sensitive species. The outcome of this proposal is significant to decision makers. If rigorous experimental studies are developed, ecologists and environmental

scientists will benefit from the proposed restoration project.

7. **Capabilities.** What is the track record of applicants in terms of past projects? Is the project team qualified to efficiently and effectively implement the proposed project? Do they have available the infrastructure and other aspects of support necessary to accomplish the project?

   no comment

8. **Cost/Benefit Comments.** Is the budget reasonable and adequate for the work proposed?

   The budget is asks for $13 million for one year. This is a huge budget. Even considering the investment in fee title acquisition, the request for $11 million for fee-title interest in 1050 acres seems very high ($11,000/acre).

Miscellaneous comments:

External Scientific: #2

Research and Restoration External Scientific Review Form

Proposal Number: **230**

Applicant Organization: **US Fish and Wildlife Service**

Proposal Title: **Recovery Implementation for Riparian Brush Rabbit and Riparian Woodrat on the Lower Stanislaus River**

Conflict of Interest Statements:
I have no financial interest in this proposal.
XCorrect
-Incorrect

In the blank below please explain any connection to proposal, to applicant, co-applicant or subcontractor or to submitting institution (write "none" if no connection):

none

Review:

Please provide an overall evaluation summary rating:

Excellent: outstanding in all respects;
Good: quality but some deficiencies;
Poor: serious deficiencies.

Overall Evaluation Summary Rating	**Provide a brief explanation of your summary rating**
-Excellent	**The proposal lacks clear objectives and performance criteria. The supporting and critical monitoring program needs to be specifically defined. The timeline needs to be reconsidered and revised. The land costs are extremely high. If lower costs cannot be negotiated, other means to secure the property (e.g., easement, lease or donation) need to be aggressively pursued.**
-Good	
XPoor	

1. **Goals.** Are the goals, objectives and hypotheses clearly stated and internally consistent? Is the concept timely and important?

   The goals are clearly stated: land acquisition and restoration. However, the area of land to be purchased varies from about 900 to over 1000 acres and from section to section. This needs to be rectified. The objectives are less clearly defined. The objectives are implicit in the text but they need to be specifically identified and quantified. The two hypotheses are vague. The second hypothesis cannot be tested, at least not in a reasonable amount of time.

2. **Justification.** Is the study justified relative to existing knowledge? Is a conceptual model clearly stated in the proposal and does it explain the underlying basis for the proposed work? Is the selection of research, pilot or demonstration project, or a full-scale implementation project

justified?

The authors give adequate justification for the proposed project. In fact, the justification comprises the majority of the proposal to the exclusion of other pertinent activities. Little information is offered about the nature of the land acquisition work or the scientific and monitoring activities needed to test the hypotheses or simply to evaluate and guide restoration. The scale of the project seems appropriate and well conceived.

3. **Approach.** Is the approach well designed and appropriate for meeting the objectives of the project? Are results likely to add to the base of knowledge? Is the project likely to generate novel information, methodology or approaches? Will the information ultimately be useful to decision-makers?

   The proposal gives scant information about the means and methods for acquiring the land, accomplishing the restoration and measuring its success. The results of the project could add considerable information to the knowledge base but the extent to which this might happen is difficult to judge based on the current proposal. As such, the value to decision makers cannot be evaluated.

4. **Feasibility.** Is the approach fully documented and technically feasible? What is the likelihood of success? Is the scale of the project consistent with the objectives?

   Is the scale of the project consistent with the objectives? The proposed activities are not adequately documented. The concept would likely work and, if implemented, it likely be successful. The proposed time schedule is totally unrealistic. To complete, all in one year, the complicated land transactions and, following this, to implement restoration, will take an army of people (mostly lawyers) and extraordinary good luck. If the proposed schedule must be met, the project is not feasible.

5. **Project-Specific Performance Measures.** Does the project include appropriate performance measures to measure success relative to the project's goals and objectives? Is there enough detail as to how the performance measures will be quantified? For restoration projects, are monitoring plans explicit and detailed enough to determine if performance measures will be adequately assessed?

   The proposal does not include sufficient information on the objectives and how success will be measured. As far as the land acquisition task goes, success can be easily measured but this is not stated. The restoration and monitoring programs are scantly defined.

6. **Products.** Are products of value likely from the project? Specifically for restoration projects, are products of value also likely from the monitoring component? Are interpretative outcomes likely from the project?

   Potentially, significant and important products could be produced: preserved and restored landscape and scientific information abut the restoration process. However, since the monitoring is not well defined, the results cannot be evaluated.

7. **Capabilities.** What is the track record of applicants in terms of past projects? Is the project team qualified to efficiently and effectively implement the proposed project? Do they have available the infrastructure and other aspects of support necessary to accomplish the project?

The proposing agency is will qualified and certainly has the means to accomplish the proposed work. The staff seem to be will qualified.

8. **Cost/Benefit Comments.** Is the budget reasonable and adequate for the work proposed?

   The budget does not seem reasonable. The principal concern is the proposed cost of land, approximately $13,500/acre.

Miscellaneous comments:

External Scientific: #3

Research and Restoration External Scientific Review Form

Proposal Number: **230**

Applicant Organization: **US Fish and Wildlife Service**

Proposal Title: **Recovery Implementation for Riparian Brush Rabbit and Riparian Woodrat on the Lower Stanislaus River**

Conflict of Interest Statements:
I have no financial interest in this proposal.
XCorrect
-Incorrect

In the blank below please explain any connection to proposal, to applicant, co-applicant or subcontractor or to submitting institution (write "none" if no connection):

none

Review:

Please provide an overall evaluation summary rating:

<u>Excellent:</u> outstanding in all respects;
<u>Good:</u> quality but some deficiencies;
<u>Poor:</u> serious deficiencies.

Overall Evaluation Summary Rating	**Provide a brief explanation of your summary rating**
XExcellent	**The environmental situation is an almost classic example of endangered species and habitat fragmentation and development. The results should be very valuable to broader conservation efforts. It also preserves riparian habitat which has watershed advantages. The personnel behind the project appear to be very qualified and experienced.** **I would, however, like to see the proposal say more on how to connect the populations and to include habitats on human landscapes.**
-Good	
-Poor	

1. **<u>Goals.</u>** Are the goals, objectives and hypotheses clearly stated and internally consistent? Is the concept timely and important?

   This project has the clear goal of preserving land for an endangered species in an area experiencing land development. It hypothesizes that land acquisition and captive breeding/release will bring back an endangered species of rabbit. Information from the success (or failure) of this proposal should be very timely and useful to other such programs.

2. **Justification.** Is the study justified relative to existing knowledge? Is a conceptual model clearly stated in the proposal and does it explain the underlying basis for the proposed work? Is the selection of research, pilot or demonstration project, or a full-scale implementation project justified?

   I believe this is a well conceived propoposal based on extensive research and experience and is justified. The conceptual model followed is for the most part well stated and conforms to what I know about small populations on fragmented habitat. My only concern is that I could not clearly find narrative about the possibility of providing corridors to connect isolated populations. Also, I would like to see some discussion about how to promote the inclusion of native vegetation into the urban development schemes. I am a proponent of developing a regional habitat mosaic that includes natural and human-dominated landscapes integrated into a single wholistic plan for saving habitats and species.

3. **Approach.** Is the approach well designed and appropriate for meeting the objectives of the project? Are results likely to add to the base of knowledge? Is the project likely to generate novel information, methodology or approaches? Will the information ultimately be useful to decision-makers?

   I like the approach of identifying fragmented habitat, confirming low population numbers, securing habitat, repopulating the habitat, and then monitoring the success of the efforts. Even if the attempt fails, valuable knowledge should be gained to help in future efforts.

4. **Feasibility.** Is the approach fully documented and technically feasible? What is the likelihood of success? Is the scale of the project consistent with the objectives?

   I believe this is a well conceived proposal made by qualified personnel. It almost appears to be a classic type situation well suited to close follow-up and the broad dissemination of results. Since the population of rabbits appears to be genetically diverse (and perhaps part of connected sub-populations), I expect the efforts to be successful. However, even if the attempt fails, knowledge gained will be useful. The scale of the undertaking appears to be appropriate but I would like to see how human dominated landscapes fit into a wholist regional habitat mosaic for saving this species and others in the ecosystem.

5. **Project-Specific Performance Measures.** Does the project include appropriate performance measures to measure success relative to the project's goals and objectives? Is there enough detail as to how the performance measures will be quantified? For restoration projects, are monitoring plans explicit and detailed enough to determine if performance measures will be adequately assessed?

   I believe that the monitoring protocols (trapping and radiotelemetry) along with genetic monitoring is adequate. The data should be amenable to statistical analysis and the identification of major factors contributing to population growth or declines.

   I would like to see if animals make use of human-dominated landscapes and to what extent. I would also like to see if the captive breeding enclosures could be placed adjacent to or in the refuges and if dispersing young would leave the enclosures and repopulate in a natural manner. I would also like to see some animals reared in a lab colony as a back-up source should the enclosure populations crash.

6. **Products.** Are products of value likely from the project? Specifically for restoration projects, are products of value also likely from the monitoring component? Are interpretative outcomes likely from the project?

Can an endangered species with fragmented populations and relatively good reproductive potential be restored to an area experiencing loss and fragmentation of habitat? Pursing the answer to this question seems to be a worthy goal. The products will be increased knowledge about land requirements and captive breeding procedures necessary to restore a species (and its ecosystem). Of course, a restored and growing population of an endangered species (and others in the ecosystem) is the major product.

7. **Capabilities.** What is the track record of applicants in terms of past projects? Is the project team qualified to efficiently and effectively implement the proposed project? Do they have available the infrastructure and other aspects of support necessary to accomplish the project?

   The project personnel appear to be experienced professionals and the proposal is well researched. The resources needed to carry out the necessary activities are in place (governmental agency).

8. **Cost/Benefit Comments.** Is the budget reasonable and adequate for the work proposed?

   My first impression is that the budget seemed high but I must admit to limited experience and knowledge about what it takes to acquire land and pay personnel (Kansas vs California). The question I often ask myself is whether it is better just to buy and preserve more land (perhaps corridors to connect the extant populations) or pay for restoration, research, and personnel. Clearly monitoring and ecosystem management will be needed in the proposed undertaking to achieve knowlege goals and will have to be paid for in an adequate manner.

Miscellaneous comments:

I like this proposal but am concerned about using the money for the best advantage. Could the rabbit populations rebound on their own if more habitat is provided (especially corridors to connect extant populations and if development is carried out with natural vegetation providing secondary habitat and passage ways to refuges)? Clearly the land purchases need to be accomplished but what about the captive breeding and release? My inclination is to fund the proposal as it is because the knowlege gained from the captive breeding and release should be very useful (unless this knowledge already resides elsewhere).

Prior Performance/Next Phase Funding:

New Proposal Number: 230

New Proposal Title: Recovery Implementation for Riparian Brush Rabbit and Riparian Woodrat on the Lower Stanislaus River

1. Prior CALFED project numbers, titles, and programs: (*list only projects for which you are the contract manager*)

   01-N08, San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge Riparian Habitat Protection and Floodplain Restoration Project - Phase II 01-N11, Habitat Acquisition for Riparian Brush Rabbit and Riparian Woodrat Ecosystem Restoration

2. Prior CVPIA project numbers, titles, and programs: (*list only projects for which you are the contract manager*)

   N/A

3. Have negotiations about contracts or contact amendments with this applicant proceeded smoothly, without persistent difficulties related to standard contract terms and conditions?

   XYes -No -N/A

   If no, please explain any difficulties:

4. Are the status, progress, and accomplishments of the applicant's current CALFED or CVPIA project(s) accurately stated?

   XYes -No -N/A

   If no, please explain any inaccuracies:

   Please note - Status accurate at time proposal was submitted. Schedule has been modified to account for some delays in setting up contract, determining whether CNLM or FWS should be primary recipient. Project to be complete July 2003.

5. Is the applicant's progress towards these project(s)' milestones and outcomes to date satisfactory?

   XYes -No -N/A

   If no, please explain deficiencies:

6. Is the applicant's reporting, records keeping, and financial management of these projects satisfactory?

   XYes -No -N/A

   If no, please explain deficiencies:

7. Will the project(s) be ready for next phase funding in 2002, based on its current progress and expenditure rates?

   XYes -No -N/A

   If no, please explain:

Other Comments:

Phase II is additional acquisition. Applicant will be ready for this next phase.

Environmental Compliance:

Proposal Number: 230

Applicant Organization: US Fish and Wildlife Service

Proposal Title: Recovery Implementation for Riparian Brush Rabbit and Riparian Woodrat on the Lower Stanislaus River

1. Are the legal or regulatory issues that affect the proposal identified adequately in the proposal?

   XYes **-**No

   If no, please explain:

   There are many unknowns in this project due to lack of knowledge of landowner's response. The applicant has most of the appropriate documents and permits checked off on the checklist. When the EIS/EIR is complete, more information will have been obtained and the proper compliance issues will be identified.

2. Does the project's timeline and budget reflect adequate planning to address legal and regulatory issues that affect the proposal?

   -Yes **X**No

   If no, please explain:

   The applicant is asking for one year of funding for completing the CEQA/NEPA documents and acquiring the permits. I think that is not enough time given the scope of this project.

3. Do the legal and regulatory issues that affect the proposal significantly impair the project's feasibility?

   -Yes **X**No

   If yes, please explain:

Other Comments:

Budget:

Proposal Number: 230

Applicant Organization: US Fish and Wildlife Service

Proposal Title: Recovery Implementation for Riparian Brush Rabbit and Riparian Woodrat on the Lower Stanislaus River

1. Does the proposal include a detailed budget for each year of requested support?

   XYes **-**No

   If no, please explain:

2. Does the proposal include a detailed budget for each task identified?

   XYes **-**No

   If no, please explain:

3. Does the proposal clearly state the type of expenses encompassed in indirect rates or overhead costs?

   -Yes **X**No

   If no, please explain:

   OH rates for applicant and participating organizations are provided, however, no detail is provided on component expenses or rate.

4. Are appropriate project management costs clearly identified?

   XYes **-**No

   If no, please explain:

5. Do the total funds requested (Form I, Question 17A) equal the combined total annual costs in the budget summary?

   XYes **-**No

   If no, please explain (for example, are costs to be reimbursed by cost share funds included in the budget summary).

6. Does the budget justification adequately explain major expenses?

   -Yes **X**No

If no, please explain:

Mutiple major expense items are reflected as best estimates with the lower end estmate used to calculate the budget. Significant unknown costs potentially exist related to fee title acquisition and relocation.

7. Are there other budget issues that warrant consideration?

XYes **-**No

If yes, please explain:

Salary costs in some instances include OH, travel, benefits costs, etc. with no component detial costs provided.

Other Comments:

Applicant is requesting "NFWF" for separate contracts due to "complexities of the various OH chrages quoted" by cooperating organizations.